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ABSTRACT

Try as she would, one instructor of preservice teachers could not convince her students that such skills as reading and vocabulary are not good indicators of how well a secondary student will write, especially in the case of minorities. One of the hardest sells to new teachers is that students--at all levels--should write extensively, regardless of their poor grammatical constructions, glaring spelling errors, etc. When these beginning English educators enter the classroom and observe students' struggling, error-laden prose, they immediately want to apply remedial fixes and grammar lessons, and skills sheets which they are convinced are necessary, "until these non-writers gain some facility with the language they are using." In an attempt to bring her students around, this educator shared with her students the results of writing tests administered to students of all abilities in three different states. Those results showed, to the surprise of the preservice teachers, that even students with low skill test scores in grammar and vocabulary can score quite high in writing. Other research supports the conclusion that minorities often do much better on essay exams than on multiple choice tests, contrary to popular belief. (Contains two tables and seven references as well as figures containing student essays.) (TB)

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Let the Writing Speak for Itself: Assessing the Composing Skills of Inner-City African American Students

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Let the Writing Speak for Itself: Assessing the Composing Skills of Inner-City African American Students

Last year in a secondary English methods course, my students pointed to "the facts"—as they saw them—about the merits of teaching grammar to "dialect-speakers" before giving them the opportunity to write. Gretchen, a particularly outspoken student, and one whose zeal will probably make her a dedicated teacher, argued that she had seen the dismal scores her practicum students had produced on standardized tests the year before. "My cooperating teacher showed me how poorly they do in such areas as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and mechanics. How can we expect them to write coherently if their scores on these objective tests are so low?" Others in the class agreed. "We know you think writing is important," they deferred. "But don't you think first things should come first?"

Matt, who had done an observation in an inner-city school that was predominantly African American, lent his "expertise" to the discussion. "In my class," he explained, "the students have real difficulty with sentence-level errors. Why, then, would you have them write long pieces?"

Try as I might to convince them that the correlation between such skills as reading, vocabulary, and other language

scores and direct writing samples is often low for minority students (White, 1985), they continued to ask this question: If students score poorly in reading and vocabulary skills on objective measures, how can we expect them to do well on an essay test? It just doesn't make sense."

One of the hardest "sells" to new teachers is that students—at all levels—should write extensively, regardless of their poor grammatical constructions, glaring spelling errors, et al. When these beginning English educators enter the classroom and observe students' struggling, error-laden prose, they immediately want to apply remedial "fixes" and grammar lessons, and—heaven forbid—skill sheets which they are convinced are necessary, "until these 'nonwriters' gain some facility with the language they are using." After all, that's what their own teachers did, and look where it's gotten *them*.

Although many of my students see the error in this thinking (with the help of a little required reading and browbeating by me), some still hold fast to "the way they were taught" by Miss Grundy who insisted that they parse sentences and memorize rules until the cows come home. And, they are quick to point out, "We liked it!" These students claim that an understanding of formal grammar has led them to good writing—and in some sense they're probably right. But I remind them that just because *they* did well does not mean that everyone did. I ask them, "How many others in the class enjoyed answering those questions about gerundive phrases, dangling participles, and the like? They are forced to admit, albeit grudgingly, that most of

the rest of the class complained, ignored, and resisted. They also remember that they liked these "grammar questions" because they were among the very few who could answer them.

I have no problem with the study of formal grammar. I believe that English teachers should know the conventions of their language. I just don't think that they should subject their students to continuous exercises which yield tenuous results when they could be improving writing by *having students write*. Further, when we superimpose the question of dialect onto the discussion, we move a step backwards. As Shaughnessy (1977) demonstrated years ago, if we think we have to "straighten out" the language patterns of students who do not speak "standard edited American English" before getting down to writing, we'll never get to it at all.

To strength my argument, I usually march out my statistics on predictability, test measures, and correlational studies based on the work that Edward White did on assessing nonmainstream groups:

> A test normed on Eastern prep school students will probably distort the results when used on a less-advantaged group of students, whatever their writing ability, if the test contains the usual number of questions calling for cultural advantages and an ear for the privileged dialect . . . students from minority cultures seem to score particularly poorly on such tests, despite relatively normal distributions on writing sample tests. (64)

White tells us that even though many believe that objective tests are fair to minorities because the bias in subjective grading is eliminated, there is growing evidence "that casts doubt on that assumption." Instead, he posits, essay testing is "substantially more fair than multiple-choice testing to racial and ethnic minorities" and should be regarded more valuable than more objective measures. (72) What we should be concerned with, according to Applebee, Langer and Mullis (1989), is the essay *topic itself* when we address the issue of unbiased writing prompts.

But my students still doubt. In fairness, I must say I am not surprised that individuals unused to looking at writing samples from a variety of age and ability groups would be skeptical.

When we get into issues of dialect and basic writers from "depressed areas" in need of "special work" in the language arts, these middle-class, mainstream students about to enter the teaching force haven't a clue. Many new teachers that I have worked with believe that lots of skills-level work, lots of graded assignments, lots of short-term activities will "bring these kids along" so that eventually, they will be able to do "grade-level work." And with little understanding of dialectal issues, fluency in prose, importance of relevance in assignment, these future teachers promise to repeat the errors we have been making in composition instruction for so long.

Reality Therapy

But most of these well-intended, intelligent, committed young people entering the field of teaching have been raised in the bosom of America's "heartland," a situation which our statistics tell us will continue for years to come (Zeichner, 1992). We must do what we can to bolster their confidence and show them what many of their future students are capable of producing. We must convince them that, if given the chance, their students will surprise them by expressing themselves very well (Oliver, in press). They will learn that many students from so-called "depressed areas" are far more capable of producing quality work than they might expect. In fact, many of these supposed "basic writers" can surpass their mainstream, middle-class counterparts, even though the latter have often had more extensive experience composing.

Going on the old adage that "a picture is worth 1000 words," I decided to illustrate by showing my class some essays I had collected for a study of writing prompts. If I could demonstrate to my students the discrepancy between indirect measures and quality of essays, I might have a chance to prove my point.

Three-State Study

Earlier in the year, I had collected data and writing samples from tenth- and eleventh-grade students from New York, Minnesota, and California. For all of these students, I recorded various vocabulary, reading comprehension, and

mechanics/usage scores. Each student was then asked to respond to this assignment (see Figure 1).

Students in all classes were given approximately 40 minutes in which to complete this essay. They had no prior information or opportunity to prepare for this writing assignment.

The assessment process for this collection involved rating sessions in which four teachers, trained in holistic rating techniques, evaluated the essays. Raters were given a scoring guide which has been adapted from the Educational Testing Service rubric (see Figure 2). Each essay received two scores. Essays earning "discrepant scores" (e.g., a score of 3 and a score of 5), were read by a third rater.

Assessing the Assessment

Showing my class the scoring guide and the characteristics of holistic assessment allowed us the opportunity to approach the issue of writing quality from a different perspective. Having just been imbued with the principles and guidelines of a "tests and measurements" class, students struggled with the concept that essay assessments often present information different from objective tests. That is, an individual's vocabulary or reading skills and/or the quality of her/his writing might be quite discrepant.

Though the writing samples I collected were from a variety of age, ability, economic and racial groups, the essays I now presented came from African American eleventh- and tenth-grade students from an inner-city school in Minneapolis, Minnesota. First, I showed them student profiles provided by

the Minneapolis "Benchmark" exam administered to students during their ninth grade. These measures indicate "how well the student performs grade level skills" in vocabulary (including multiple meanings, substitutions, definitions and their relationships to words, and the ability to supply correct words) and reading comprehension (including the abilities to choose the main idea and correct details, make inferences, relate sentences to paragraphs, and distinguish fact from opinion (Data Recognition Corporation, n.d.). Although the Benchmark also has a well-prepared writing assessment, these essays were not available. It would have been interesting to compare these data with my own writing assessments, a matter for future speculation.

For the purpose of my argument, our class examined information for twelve eleventh-grade students (see Table 1) and seven tenth-grade students (see Table 2). My class had many questions and made several interesting observations. First, they wanted to know why there were figures missing. Susan, having just completed a class based on quantitative measurement, said that we can't really use these measures due to this missing data. I pointed out that poor attendance and transiency in this school made collecting complete records almost impossible. Thus, if we agreed with her, we could not look at this data at all. Susan yielded for argument's sake.

The next hurdle was the generally dismal showing that almost all students had in the first two categories. I asked my class to look over both tables and try to come up with a

statement which would describe what they saw. Their responses revealed their understandable dismay that these scores were so low. Further, they noted the inconsistencies in individual student's scores. For example, though Student #4 (Table 1) has at least a 71% "skill level" for vocabulary, his reading comprehension skill was very low (10%).

I then confessed that I, too, was quite discouraged myself when first looking at these scores. I had wondered whether it would be fair to put these students into a comparative study with other, more mainstream students who, I knew, had had much more experience writing. Further, even the teachers I had worked with to get the writing samples were skeptical of what their students would be willing or able to produce. Comments like "I'm not sure they'll do this" or "If I can get them to write, I'll send you the essays" were typical.

Looking at this data, my class was beginning to see the discrepancies in test reports. They were concerned with parity and asked questions about "equal playing ground" and equitable standards. To their credit, my students were beginning to see the nuances of assessment testing and starting to realize that standardized measures might not always tell the tale.

Alex suggested that we were now in a double bind. "To put these students, with obvious limitations in their writing experience, up against middle class, mainstream groups with plenty of practice composing for different audiences and purposes is unfair. On the other hand, to discount them is

discriminatory and leaves them out of the population completely."

"Well," I jumped into what now was becoming a spirited discussion, "whether for good or for ill, I decided to put this group of 'underdeveloped' writers into the mainstream pool with everybody else." Somewhat surprised, my students went back to our tables for another look. They shook their heads, thinking me a bit harsh.

"That might not have been so bad," Daniel called out. "Look at these numbers. Like Student #10, for instance" (see Figure 3). We all looked at Student #10 whose scores (vocabulary=40%, reading comprehension=34%) were pretty poor. "But look at his essay ratings," exclaimed Betty whose skepticism had been obvious throughout this whole discussion. "He got 5s from both raters. Is there any chance we could see his essay?"

"How clever of you to ask," I chirped and flipped Student #10's essay onto the overhead screen. I asked the class to look back to the scoring rubric to compare the criteria with Student #10's essay. "Yes," several chimed in. "This one's pretty good." We analyzed the essay, paying attention to the sense of wholeness and organization and the depth of explanation presented in this rather short time. Having looked at some writing samples from eleventh-grade students prior to this discussion, my class had some awareness of what writers at this age level were capable of producing. Students were impressed with the syntactic fluency and style of this essay, the relative ease with which this writer used language, the freedom from

glaring errors so typical of 'basic writers.' "Geez," Henry exclaimed. "But look at his test scores." I chuckled silently, once again.

To bring my point home, I asked the class to look at the tenth-grade group. Again, we picked out one of the essays with the best rating, this time from Student #4 (see Figure 4). Though his reading comprehension rating was in the 70s, we had to acknowledge that his vocabulary score was not impressive (55%). Establishing, then, that Student #4 was not particularly strong if using these indirect measures, we looked at his essay. Since we had done some previous work assessing essays at this level, too, my class had an idea of what tenth graders were capable of producing. They were impressed again. This essay represented a good product for a 40 minute writing task. It was coherent, well organized and developed, syntactically sophisticated, and interesting to read.

To underscore this discussion, I offered students a few other examples of how quantitative, indirect measures of writing are discrepant with actual essays. With each example, they became more and more convinced that before making any judgements about students' ability to write, we must first look at their writing—not their reading comprehension measures or vocabulary skills.

Implications

One of the enigmas of writing assessments is that the correlations between indirect measures and actual writing

samples is low. Further, we have evidence to suggest that indirect measures for ethnic minorities are consistently lower than mainstream groups. Recognizing these issues is very important for new teachers, indeed, for all of us when evaluating the work of our students. If given the opportunity to write, instead of being judged by indirect measures not relevant to composing abilities, students will often surprise us in most positive ways.

Figure 1: Assignment

Many people feel that the communities they grew up in had a major influence on their lives. For some, the community provided a positive environment where they received the support necessary for growth, education, hope for the future. Others feel that their communities had a negative influence, holding them back through fear of violence or drugs, lack of support or opportunities to succeed.

What kind of influence has your community had on you? Write an essay describing your community and show how some aspect of it has had a positive or negative influence on your life.

Figure 2: Scoring Guide

(adapted from Educational Testing Service rubric, March 1987)

Essay must respond to assigned task, parts of which may be implied.

Score

6 High degree of competence
Well organized, clear ideas, syntactic variety and facility with language
Generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure

5 Clear competence
Generally well organized, explains key ideas, syntactic variety, and facility with language
Generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure

4 Competence
Adequately organized, explains key ideas, adequate facility with language
Some errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure

3 Some degree of competence but clearly flawed

One or more of these weaknesses:

- Inadequate organization, explanation of key ideas
- Pattern or accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure
- Limited or inappropriate word choice

2 Limited competence and seriously flawed

One or more of these weaknesses:

- Weak organization
- Few related details
- Serious errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure, word choice

1 Fundamental deficiencies

Serious errors, incoherent, undeveloped

Figure 3: Essay #10—Eleventh Grade Male
Environmental Influence

As a kid I remember living in the nicest neighborhood. At the time, everyone was so peaceful and quiet. Once and a while I'd run into a bully or two , but it didn't happen often. This neighborhood had a positive influence on me. I learned to be responsible and I made lots of friends. After a while my parents decided to move to the city for easy access to work.

As a more country kid, I had to get used to the city. The people here were totally different. There were more violénce, roughness and cold hearts. Moving to the city really changed me as a kid. I became more cold and mean and soon went on to bully. Everyday I would fight, it seemed like everyone was at war. I even started using language that I had never used before and never would have if it wasn't for the city.

Presently, I still live in the city, but in a nicer neighborhood. I'm totally changed and I've become more responsible and loving. I've grown to like the city a lot and I don't think that I could leave the neighborhood that I presently live in for anything.

Figure 4: Essay #4-Tenth-Grade Male

I live on the north side of Minneapolis. The so called roguish side of Minneapolis, Minnesota. I am 16 years of age and in tenth grade at _____ High School.

I think my life as a kid, say about 4-9 years of age, growing up in my community was safe and careful. You wouldn't worry about anything bad. Everyday was play day. Everybody knew you so I felt very safe. If I were to get in trouble any of the parents could scold you, sometimes even spank you.

If someone were to try and do something to me there were a lot of houses I could run to for help, not just mine.

I was always taught to be careful on the streets, but I seldom had to watch my guard. There was no real danger.

As I got older, about 10-14 years of age, things started changing. Gangs was the big things on the streets. Everywhere there was gangs. I saw no purpose in fighting someone just because he wore a certain color, or liked a certain, or screamed a certain so-called language. Now I had to watch my back. I would not care what they thought of me because I wore a certain color. I just say its my decision to wear my clothes not theirs. I had to watch my back every where I went. People would come up to me asking are you a Vice Lord or a Disciple. I just give them a look.

Now I just take life one step, one day at a time. You always watch your back. But now you have to watch your front, right, left, up, and down, as well as your back.

So I guess you can say I lived in a safe community as a child. As I grew older it became more of the watch your back type community. Now it's the watch everywhere type. I think it only gets worse in the future. I only hope I can hack it.

Table 1: Eleventh-Grade Scores

				Score from Rater	
Student #	Sex	Voc.	Read.	#1	#2
1	F	47	59	4	4
2	F			4	5
3	F	78	75	4	4
4	M	71	10	2	2
5	M	21	15	3	3.5
6	F	82	86	4	4
7	M	71	59	2	2
8	M	47	34	3	3
9	M	16	24	5	4
10	M	40	34	5	5
11	F	40	41	4	4
12	M	54	49	4	4.5

Table 2: Tenth-Grade Scores

				Score from Rater		
Student #	Sex	Voc.	Read.	#1	#2	#3
1	F	52	61	3.5	3	
2	M	55	20	3	5	3.5
3	F	45	41	3.5	5	
4	M	55	73	5	5	
5	F	30	27	3	3	
6	M			5	5	
7	M	78	73	3	3	

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